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Letter Perfect Woman Simplifies College Essay Process



PHOTO CAPTION: Kathleen O'Rourke/Staff photo Stamford resident Maxene Fabe Mulford works with Andrew Metter of Greenwich as he prepares his law school applications. Mulford's company, Uniquely U., consults with students for college applications.

By **Nadia Lerner** Staff Writer Maxene Fabe Mulford realized she and her five high school buddies were at different ends of the life spectrum at lunch last year in Manhattan. This group of newly retired women were excited about traveling, gardening, volunteering and visiting with grandchildren.

"Retirement? I'm just getting started," Mulford, 64, informed her friends.

In 1998, this Stamford resident co-partnered with a neighbor to form Uniquely U., a college essay consulting business. Once helping a few as 11 clients, Mulford now guides over 75 students through the college application and essay process. The typically five to seven sessions, involving a five-step brainstorming and writing process, cost \$200 per hour. (She offers a free consultation to prospective clients so they understand her method of operation.)

What's key, explains Mulford in her book-lined loft office in Stamford, is that students must learn to define themselves before laying the groundwork for college applications. "The thing you have to get away from more than anything else is what (the college) is looking for. It's about what do you want? Who are you?"

In the '70s, Mulford worked in publishing in New York City, and had written a couple of books. She married Guy, daughter Alexis was born in 1979, followed by a move to Stamford. "I kept thinking I would write as she naps, but she never napped. It became so much more interesting to be a mom."

Three years later, Charles came along, and so began the days of carpooling, brownie baking, school newsletter writing, a Parent-Teacher Organization presidency and other assorted activities.

When it came time to tackle the college admissions process with her children, Mulford was primed and ready. She enjoyed visiting colleges, overseeing her teens as they wrote their essays and admits: "I actually felt bereft when it ended."

The business idea came as a fluke when a former neighbor, then Westhill High School senior Anand Ahuja, asked her to look over the final draft of his college essay. He had been reassured by his English teacher, guidance counselor and others that the work was fine. But Mulford spotted the cliches often typical of a college essay. She felt his story about the influence his grandfather had on his life was lacking substance.

By asking Ahuja to recall important things in his background, he remembered a pivotal time: In middle school, kids called him a dork for carrying around a change purse his grandfather had given him.

"We zeroed in on the day he stood up on the lunch line and said to them, 'This is who I am. Take it or leave it.' " Ahuja told this story in his rewritten college essay. He described the purse, how his grandfather gave it to him, and other things about his Indian heritage.

Ahuja, now 26 and a strategy manager/vice president at J.P. Morgan Chase in Manhattan, was accepted at seven of 11 colleges and attended Princeton University, ironic because in addition to his essay, Ahuja asked Mulford about a question on the Princeton application he found presumptuous. It asked what the student would gain after four years at the school and Ahuja thought it should have asked how the college would benefit from him being a student there. "I told him if you think it's stupid, tell them why you think it's stupid," she says.

In his application, Ahuja wrote: "What about my (Indian) heritage? Where do you think madras and khaki come from? Where does the little polo pony on the Ralph Lauren shirts come from? What was Columbus looking for (a trade route to India in search of spices)? It's all from India. Maybe the question should be what are you going to learn from me?"

Princeton told him it was his answer that got him in.

"She suggested digging deeper, giving examples, details, instead of saying what you want someone to hear," says Ahuja, who will attend Harvard Business School this fall. Her approach was so different, he says, they decided to partner in the college essay consultation business.

The pair invested \$1,000 and drafted advertising brochures. Uniquely U., coined by Mulford, was on its way, helping 30 students in its first year.

The two continue as partners, with Mulford in the primary role. When Ahuja has time, he sits in on sessions and helps with ideas.

Says Alexis, 27, managing editor for a small publishing company in Norwalk: "If my mother says she is going to do something, she doesn't step back from it. It's all or nothing with her."

\* For information about Uniquely U. College Essay Consultants, call 961-9555; toll free, 866-UUESSAY; [www.uuessay.com](http://www.uuessay.com).